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IN PAGAN
SOCIETY

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I. THE HATERS OF MEN

ON 19 July 64 A.D. a fire broke out in Rome not far from the Capena Gate. Gaining rapid hold among the booths and hovels of the crowded trading quarters round the great circus under the Palatine and Caelian Hills, the conflagration raged for six days and seven nights. Of the fourteen regions into which Augustus had divided the city three were wiped out, and only four remained untouched. The loss of life was heavy.

To the stricken populace the question of responsibility immediately suggested itself. The historian Tacitus makes it quite clear that a grim suspicion was abroad. Had Nero done the deed? Certain it is that the emperor could not be charged with inertia. He had rushed up from Antium, had opened the public buildings and imperial gardens to the homeless, had requisitioned food and materials, and thrown all his energies into the task of relief. Nevertheless a rumour circulated. It was alleged that, in the midst of the catastrophe, the incorrigible dilettante had ascended an eminence whence the horrible sight could be seen in all its awful splendour, and, lyre in hand, had sung of the fall of Troy. It was also remarked that the

devastation was not without its convenience for one whose megalomaniac building schemes sought space for his vast 'Golden House'.

The truth will never be known. Nero, lyre changed to fiddle, has come down the centuries in a proverb, but if those heavy features hid the secret of Rome's fire, the secret perished with the criminal five years later and his accomplices held their peace. It is a fact, none the less, that Nero was terrified. The 'many-headed beast', the proletariat of Rome, could be dangerous. Nero met the menace with a parade of religion, the consultation of oracles, public prayer and sacrifice. But popular emotion refused to be appeased. Some impressive demonstration seemed necessary, and at this point some villain with the emperor's ear conceived a dastardly idea. Tacitus¹ may be left to tell the story:

Such were the measures suggested by human counsels; after which means were taken to propitiate the gods. The Sibylline books were consulted, and prayers were offered, as prescribed by them, to Vulcan, to Ceres, and to Proserpine. Juno was supplicated by the matrons, in the Capitol first, and afterwards at the nearest point upon the sea, from which water was drawn to sprinkle the temple and image of the goddess; banquets to the goddesses and all-night festivals were celebrated by married women.

'But neither human aid, nor imperial bounty, nor atoning-offerings to the gods, could remove the sinister suspicion that the fire had been brought about by Nero's order. To put an end therefore to this rumour, he shifted the charge on to others, and

¹ Tacitus, *Annals*, 15. 38-44.

inflicted the most cruel tortures upon a body of men detested for their abominations, and popularly known by the name of Christians. This name came from one Christus, who was put to death in the reign of Tiberius by the Procurator Pontius Pilate; but though checked for the time, the detestable superstition broke out again, not in Judaea only, where the mischief began, but even in Rome, where every horrible and shameful iniquity, from every quarter of the world, pours in and finds a welcome.

‘First those who acknowledged themselves of this persuasion were arrested; and upon their testimony a vast number were condemned, not so much on the charge of incendiarism as for their hatred of the human race. Their death was turned into a diversion. They were clothed in the skins of wild beasts, and torn to pieces by dogs; they were fastened to crosses, or set up to be burned, so as to serve the purpose of lamps when daylight failed. Nero gave up his own gardens for this spectacle; he provided also Circensian games, during which he mingled with the populace, or took his stand upon a chariot, in the garb of a charioteer. But guilty as these men were and worthy of direst punishment, the fact that they were being sacrificed for no public good, but only to glut the cruelty of one man, aroused a feeling of pity on their behalf.’

In these words the Christians enter Roman history, tormented, scorned, and misrepresented. It is quite clear that the charge of incendiarism was supported in the popular mind by a reputation fastened upon the Christians by their closer enemies. They hated, it was

alleged, the human race. What does this mean? Something more simple than Ramsay's¹ explanation seems required. 'To the Romans,' he writes, '*genus humanum* meant not the human race in general, but the Roman world, men who lived according to Roman manners and laws; the rest were enemies and barbarians. The Christians then were enemies to civilized man, and to the customs and laws which regulated civilized society. They were bent on relaxing the bonds which held society together; they introduced divisions into families and set children against their parents. . . .'

It is doubtful whether the Roman multitude was so self-conscious in its sociology. A simpler explanation of the unpopularity of the new sect is provided by the metaphor behind the word *exitiabilis* in Tacitus' account. The adjective, which means 'deadly', suggests the metaphor of a disease, and the figure of speech is worth investigation. Tertullus² calls Paul a disease. Pliny, in a document we shall later examine, speaks of the 'contagion of this superstition'. An obscure reference in a Rescript of Claudius, found in the Fayum some thirty years ago, and addressed in November 41 A.D. to the Jews of Alexandria, appears to use the same metaphor in the same connection. 'The Jews,' runs the paragraph, 'are forbidden to bring or invite other Jews to come by sea from Syria. . . . If they do not abstain from this conduct I shall proceed against them for fomenting a malady common to the world.'³ What is the significance of this metaphor, which might be

¹ *The Church in the Roman Empire*, p. 236.

² Acts xxiv. 5.

³ For further evidence that Claudius and not Nero was the first emperor to take official action against the Christians see *The Emperor Claudius and His Achievement*, Momigliano.

further illustrated from Xenophon, Demosthenes, and Plato? Perhaps the last named¹ provides the key. 'Any man,' he writes, 'incapable of participating in mutual respect and law must be put to death as a social plague.' The expression suggests the social misfit, the awkward person, unable by temperament, or unwilling by conviction, to participate in the common activities of a group or community.

Such is the shadow under which the Christians enter secular history. Their name had been given in contempt at Antioch, and now the old metaphor for the outcast and the renegade was made theirs. It was an expression of mass psychology. An uncompromising conscience had withdrawn the followers of Christ from participation in many of the activities of a society which was much more communal and closely knit than that of the Anglo-Saxon world of today. The crowd had marked the abstinence, reacted as crowds react, and branded the abstainers with its disapproval. Crowds² are feeble in reasoning and passionate in imagination. Hence, too often, the sad fate of minorities. Nero, like a hundred demagogues before and after him, seized on the ill-considered emotions of the mass. So, five years before, in an instructive story to which we shall return, had the silversmiths of Ephesus. There was fuel for Nero's firing in the dislike which the compliant and conforming majority feel for the dissident and non-conforming few. The spectacle of moral earnestness, such is human nature, offends the morally inert, and the sight of disciplined living rebukes and angers self-indulgence. The vested interests of vice fear virtue,

¹ *Protagoras*, 322 D. See *La Réaction Pa enne*, Pierre de Labriolle, p. 24.

² See *The Crowd*, Gustave Le Bon, Ch. 3.

and corruption is uneasy in the presence of a sterner and challenging uprightness. So, in varied fashion, had the Christians stirred the emotional hostility of the ancient crowd. Nero canalized the crowd's passion, gave it self-expression, and supplied a cover of logic for baseness, and a cloak of social righteousness for unreasoning hatred.

Social ostracism, therefore, in the early history of the Church preceded official persecution. The Christian was at odds with society before he fell out with the State. It is possible from the New Testament to shed some light on the cruel dilemma in which he was placed, and to unearth evidence of an inner conflict which all but shattered the Church. The study of the situation throws light on the principles of persecution and directs attention to some laws of Christian sociology which are by way of finding new importance in the growing paganism of the day. As Professor Butterfield¹ remarks in a significant passage: 'We are back for the first time in something like the earliest centuries of Christianity, and those centuries afford some relevant clues to the kind of attitude to adopt.'

II. TWO CASE HISTORIES

It will be profitable at this point to examine two case histories which illustrate the theme. They both reveal quite clearly the tension created in pagan society by the presence and witness of the Christian Church, and introduce the initiators of hostile action.

The first document, like the chapter of Tacitus already quoted, is a study in mass psychology. It is

¹ *Christianity and History*, p. 135.

from the pen of no mean historian, the physician Luke:¹

‘ Now just at that time there arose no small commotion about the Way. For there was a certain Demetrius, a silversmith, who made miniature silver shrines of Artemis, a business which brought great profit to the craftsmen in his employ.

‘ He called his men together, and others who were engaged in similar trades, and said to them: “ You men well know that our prosperity depends on this business of ours; and you see and hear that, not in Ephesus only but throughout almost the whole province of Asia, this fellow Paul has led away a vast number of people by asserting that these are not gods at all that are made by men’s hands. There is danger, therefore, not only that this our trade will become of no account, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will fall into utter disrepute. . . .” After listening to this harangue, they became furiously angry and began shouting: “ Great is Artemis of Ephesus.” The riot and uproar spread through the city, till at last with one accord they rushed into the theatre, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus who were fellow-travellers with Paul. Then Paul would have liked to go in and address the people, but the disciples would not let him do so. . . . The people, meanwhile, kept shouting, some one thing and some another; for the assembly was all uproar and confusion, and the greater part had no idea why they had come together.’²

¹ Acts xix. 23-41.

² Verses 23-32 (Weymouth).

The scene, says Ramsay,¹ 'is the most instructive picture of society in an Asian city which has come down to us'. We are 'taken direct into the artisan life of Ephesus, and all is so characteristic, so true to common life, and so unlike what would occur to anyone writing at a distance that the conclusion is inevitable: we have here a picture drawn from nature. . . .' The howling crowd, touched by Luke with a phrase of classic sarcasm (verse 32); the chanted invocation; the cool official with his clever speech (verses 35-41); these and a dozen other details leave an abiding impression. The whole passage is historical writing at its best, Thucydidean in its brevity and irony. Moreover, as Ramsay continues, in the guildmaster's wicked speech (verses 25-27), 'are concentrated most of the feelings and motives which, from the beginning to the end, made the mob so hostile to the Christians in the great oriental cities'.

We are witnessing, in fact, another phase of a developing conflict. Of the guilds, or *collegia*, here mentioned as the base of organized opposition to the Church, we shall hear more. These societies were not trade unions. Their functions were primarily social and they were multitudinous in ancient society. Records exist of guilds of bankers, doctors, architects, producers of woollen and linen goods, dyers, workers in metal, stone, or clay, builders, carpenters, farmers, gardeners, fishers, bakers, pastrycooks, barbers, embalmers, and transport workers. Their ramifications extend to such convivial groups as the 'Late Sleepers' and 'Late Drinkers' who have left their scribblings in

¹ *Paul the Traveller and Roman Citizen*, pp. 277, 278; *The Church in the Roman Empire*, vii. 5.

jest or earnest on the walls of Pompeii. 'No other age,' writes Dill,¹ 'felt a greater craving for some form of social life, greater than the family and narrower than the State.' The *collegia* 'satisfied the need of the humble for the pleasures of social intercourse and the dignity of self-expression'.² On the other hand the tumult at Ephesus is clear evidence that the social club, under adroit leadership, could become a political weapon in the hands of those whose economic interests coincided. Hence the sensitiveness of the Roman administration, of which Trajan's prohibition of the formation of a fire brigade at Nicomedia³ is a vivid illustration. The situation in Ephesus was full of portent. Demetrius secured his prime objective. Paul withdrew. Although the tradition of Roman law stood firm, Paul no doubt saw clearly that a watchful State was likely to deal as severely with the Church as with its persecutors. Nor, as the next illustration shows, was the fear unjustified.

In the year 112 A.D. the Governor of Bithynia became aware of tension in his province. The Christian Church, strong and established, was striking heavily at the roots of paganism, and protests were finding expression. Trade, as in Ephesus, was suffering, and the governor, anxious for peace and prosperity, took action. Pliny was in the habit of consulting Trajan on all matters of importance, and the official correspondence has survived. The letter of Pliny and the imperial reply⁴ form the record of an act of repression. The letter is as follows. It should be read carefully, both

¹ *Roman Society from Nero to Marcus Aurelius*, pp. 267, 271.

² *The Pagan Background of Early Christianity*, Halliday, p. 60.

³ Pliny, *Epistles*, x. 34.

⁴ Pliny, *Epistles*, x. 96, 97.

for the poignant story of ancient suffering and for the light it throws on the motives of persecution. Between the lines it is possible to see the guilds again:

‘It is a rule, Sir, which I invariably observe, to refer myself to you in all my doubts; for who is more capable of guiding my uncertainty or informing my ignorance? Having never been present at any trials of the Christians, I am unacquainted with the method and limits to be observed either in examining or punishing them. Whether any difference is to be made on account of age, or no distinction allowed between the youngest and the adult; whether repentance admits to a pardon, or if a man has been once a Christian it avails him nothing to recant; whether the mere profession of Christianity, albeit without crimes, or only the crimes associated therewith are punishable—in all these points I am greatly doubtful.

‘In the meanwhile, the method I have observed towards those who have been denounced to me as Christians is this: I interrogated them whether they were Christians; if they confessed it I repeated the question twice again, adding the threat of capital punishment; if they still persevered, I ordered them to be executed. For whatever the nature of their creed might be, I could at least feel no doubt that contumacy and inflexible obstinacy deserved chastisement. There were others also possessed with the same infatuation, but being citizens of Rome, I directed them to be carried thither.

‘These accusations spread (as is usually the case) from the mere fact of the matter being investigated

and several forms of the mischief came to light. A placard was put up, without any signature, accusing a large number of persons by name. Those who denied they were, or had ever been, Christians, who repeated after me an invocation to the gods, and offered adoration, with wine and frankincense, to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for that purpose, together with those of the gods, and who finally cursed Christ—none of which acts, it is said, those who are really Christians can be forced into performing—these I thought it proper to discharge. Others who were named by the informer at first confessed themselves Christians, and then denied it; true, they had been of that persuasion but they had quitted it, some three years, others many years, and a few as much as twenty-five years ago. They all worshipped your statue and the images of the gods, and cursed Christ.

‘They affirmed, however, the whole of their guilt, or their error, was that they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deed, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an ordinary and innocent kind. Even this practice, however, they had abandoned after the publication of my edict, by which, according to your orders, I had forbidden political associations. I judged it so much the more necessary to extract the real truth, with the

assistance of torture, from two female slaves, who were styled deaconesses: but I could discover nothing more than depraved and excessive superstition.

‘I therefore adjourned the proceedings, and betook myself at once to your counsel. For the matter seemed to me well worth referring to you—especially considering the numbers endangered. Persons of all ranks and ages, and of both sexes are, and will be, involved in the prosecution. For this contagious superstition is not confined to the cities only, but has spread through the villages and rural districts; it seems possible, however, to check and cure it. It is certain at least that the temples, which had been almost deserted, begin now to be frequented; and the sacred festivals, after a long intermission, are again revived; while there is a general demand for sacrificial meat,¹ which for some time past had met with but few purchasers. From hence it is easy to imagine what multitudes may be reclaimed from this error, if a door be left open to repentance.’

What had happened in Bithynia? The Christians were not prosecuted as a *sodalitas*.² No law covered their offence. ‘They were judged and condemned by Pliny,’ says Ramsay, ‘with Trajan’s full approval, by virtue of the *imperium* delegated to him, and in accordance with the instructions issued to governors of provinces to search out and punish sacrilegious persons, thieves, brigands, and kidnappers.’ The Christians

¹ Reading *passimque venire victimarum carnem*, suggested by A. Körte (*Hermes*, 1928, pp. 482–4).

² *The Church in the Roman Empire*, pp. 213–16.

were, in a word, looked upon as 'enemies to the fundamental principles of society'. The admission of the Name was condemnation.

It is easy to reconstruct the situation. Pliny had received the complaints of the temple priests, of the guild of the butchers, whose sales of sacrificial meat were falling off, and of all the small community which derived profit from the functioning of pagan ritual. The Christians were tampering with the established processes of life, challenging, rebuking. As in Rome, as in Ephesus, the injured forces of paganism struck back with some success. The weak and the fearful fell away. The faithful and the brave died or suffered exile. The sales of the tainted meat increased and the legalistic governor saw his province sink to rest. And in his letter he left a record of one of the precise moments when the social ostracism of the Christian Church turned into State persecution.

How, precisely, had the Bithynian Christians earned the hostility of their pagan neighbours? It appears that they had endeavoured to apply principles laid down by Paul in his first letter to Corinth, and that revealing document must be our next concern.

III. EATING MEAT

It was in Corinth that the Church and paganism found themselves from the beginning in the closest and most challenging contact. That is why, as one commentator¹ remarks, 'the connection of Corinth . . . with the early progress of Christianity is so close and eventful

¹ Conybeare and Howson, *Life and Letters of St. Paul*, p. 297.

that no student of Holy Writ ought to be satisfied without obtaining as correct and clear an idea as possible of its social condition, and its relation to the other parts of the Empire'.

When Paul came down from Athens, the great city on the Isthmus was in the heyday of its commercial prosperity. Destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C., and founded again by its destroyers a century later, Corinth had already demonstrated its importance as a gateway between east and west. Planted on the Isthmus, with the trade of the world flowing through her docks, traversed by the travelling legions, swarming with the sailor multitude, and the host who batten in seaport towns on the pickings of passing trade, crowded with the agents of government and commerce, Corinth was inevitably rich, cosmopolitan, and vicious. Her presiding deities were first Poseidon, the god of the sea, under whose protection in the days when Greek fought Greek before the Romans came, the navies had sailed to meet the fleets of Athens, and the merchantmen to cull the rich plums of Mediterranean commerce. The great Isthmian Games, to whose contests Paul refers at the end of chapter ix, were held in Poseidon's honour. Aphrodite, the city's other patron deity, had her temple on the Acrocorinthus, whose rocky bulk towered 2,000 feet above the busy streets, and the host of priestess courtesans who served the shrine with the obscenities and 'sacred prostitution' of an oriental cult, helped to give Corinth its rank flavour of immoral vice. So notorious was the city for its debauchery that the phrase 'to play the Corinthian' found its place in Greek to express the lowest of loose living, and even in modern English, nineteen centuries later, 'a Corinthian' is a

term for a polished rake. Here, says Findlay,¹ Paul 'confronted the world's glory and infamy with the sight of "Jesus Christ and Him crucified", confident that in the word of the Cross lay a spell to subdue the pride and cleanse the foulness of Corinthian life, a force which would prove to Gentile society in this place of utter corruption the wisdom and power of God unto salvation. In "the Church of God in Corinth", with all its defects and follies, this redeeming power was lodged'.

In the earliest infancy of the Church two powerful and venomous foes twined themselves about the cradle. Like the infant Hercules in the myth, the Church strangled its attackers, but the fight was not won without toil and tears. 'With a supernatural vigour it rent off the coils of Jewish bigotry, and stifled the poisonous breath of heathen licentiousness, but the peril was mortal and the struggle was for life or death.'² Of the second conflict the Corinthian Epistles are the documents.

We speak with much looseness of the early Church. 'To talk of getting back to its life,' says Shaw³ rightly, 'is simply to talk of what we do not understand. Paul's great endeavour, his mighty struggle and incessant prayer, was to get it away from its own feeble life, to lift it to a higher level and a purer air.' What that effort cost him lies behind the irony and the passion of the First Epistle to the Corinthians.

The Corinthian Christians were a formidable mixture. A large proportion of them, as usual, were Jews

¹ *Expositor's Greek Testament*, Vol. ii, p. 754.

² Conybeare and Howson, *Life and Letters of St. Paul*, p. 359.

³ *The Pauline Epistles*, p. 138.

bent on converting Christianity into a liberal sect of Judaism. Nor were these united. 'I am of Apollos,' said one; 'I am of Cephas,' said another. The orthodoxy of Jerusalem and the liberal Judaism of Alexandria, in other words, found crude translation in Corinthian Christianity. Paul might well have shuddered at the brew. 'And I,' said a third, with a loyalty which its object could only reject with passion, 'am one of Paul's men.' And a fourth, pathetically self-righteous, claimed: 'I owe my faith to Christ alone.'¹

Four denominations, in fact, were struggling for mastery. The greatness of both Paul and Peter is revealed by the unhesitating firmness with which both resisted the divisive tendencies which sought to build sects under their names. 'After all, who is Paul?' writes the former. 'Who is Apollos? I may have done the planting and Apollos the watering, but it was God who made the seed grow. . . . Planter and waterer are alike insignificant, though each shall be rewarded according to his particular work. . . . So let no one boast of men.'² 'Meanwhile,' writes Peter, 'consider that God's patience is meant to be man's salvation, as our dear brother Paul pointed out to you in his letter to you written out of the wisdom God gave him. There are, of course, some things in his letters which are difficult to understand, and which, unhappily, ill-informed and unbalanced people distort (as they do the other scriptures), and bring disaster on their heads.'³

Peter's remark in the last verse is a shrewd appraisal of the situation. These 'ill-informed and

¹ 1 Cor. i. 10-12 (J. B. Phillips).

² 1 Cor. iii. 5-7, 21.

³ 2 Pet. iii. 15, 16 (J. B. Phillips).

unbalanced people' should be noted. A problem which was to stir wide concern and almost tear the Church in two appears first to have taken shape in Corinth. The net, in that dark city, had brought a varied catch ashore. The Enemy, to vary the parable, had been busy with a strong crop of tares. And the weeds in that field had been the purveyors of a flashy philosophy, 'ill-informed and unbalanced people', who had distorted the teaching of Paul. To read between the lines of the first four chapters of Paul's letter is to catch the undertone of the writer's alarm. Ramsay¹ classes these chapters as a supreme 'specimen and proof of Paul's power in pure literature'. Careful reading will reveal the restrained irony and passion mingled with love and tenderness with which the Apostle reveals the hollowness of the Corinthian pretence. 'For look at your own calling as Christians, my brothers. You do not see among you many of the wise (according to this world's judgment) nor many of the ruling class, nor many from the noblest families. But God has chosen what the world calls foolish to confound the wise. . . .'² A dangerous minority in Corinth had received the gospel as a system of liberal philosophy, a scheme of emancipation which broke the bondage of old taboos, not indeed to replace them with the higher loyalties and loftier standards of Christian love, but by a licence which dishonoured Christ. Paul had taught that prohibitions were abolished for the righteous. Those who distorted his doctrine, 'ill-informed and unbalanced people', maintained that all things were lawful to the redeemed. 'The law is dead,' was their motto, and like antinomians of more than one generation they

¹ *The Teaching of Paul*, pp. 414 ff.

² 1 Cor. i. 26, 27.

made their liberty an occasion for the flesh. This danger lies in the bold Pauline gospel. Those who originally challenged Paul on this issue had such evidence as Corinth provided to prove their point. And that evidence might be multiplied. 'Right through Christian history,' writes Stewart,¹ 'the workings of this spirit can be traced; men have found it easy to shelter their sins beneath "the imputed righteousness of Christ", have used a phrase like "not under the law but under grace" to blur the otherwise disturbing fact that God is holy and that there is such a thing as the moral stringency of Jesus. . . . So the Christian faith has been wounded in the house of its friends, and the terribly damaging divorce between religion and ethics has cast a slur on the Church's name. . . . Plainly then the antinomian charge brought against Paul is a serious one. And yet there is one factor in the apostolic gospel which, even alone by itself and unaided, absolutely rebuts the charge and tears every criticism of the kind to shreds. That factor is union with Christ, union in His death and resurrection.'

The justification of Paul, however, is not our present theme. What at this point it is pertinent to ask is the question why the heresy which wrongly claimed Paul's authority was so strong at Corinth. The answer lies in the peculiar strength of the temptations which lay in Corinthian life. They were temptations both to open vice and to dangerous compromise. The former need not detain us at the moment. The libertines whose muddy trail begins in Corinth were probably a minority. Strange birds find shelter in the mustard

¹ *A Man in Christ*, pp. 194-7.

tree, and there were worshippers of the Corinthian Aphrodite among the professed followers of Christ. The cult of the Goddess of Love must have been a perennial curse to the men of Corinth. It will be more instructive here to examine the case of the basically sincere, 'ill-informed' folk perhaps, even 'un-balanced', who found it difficult to interpret the 'liberty' of their new faith in terms of social practice and daily living. They are those to whom particularly the injunctions about 'idol meat' are addressed.

It is difficult for a modern Christian to grasp the pervasive nature of the paganism with which his spiritual forbears had to deal. Many pages in Tertullian reveal vividly the practical difficulties which at every turn confronted the Christian in the ancient world. 'Why, even the streets and the market-places,' he writes,¹ 'the baths and the taverns and our very dwelling-places, are not altogether free from idols. Satan and his angels have filled the whole world.' It was worse than this. The conscientious Christian had to absent himself from public festivals. They opened with pagan adoration and sacrifice. His membership of a trade guild, and in consequence his commercial standing and goodwill, involved the awkwardness of 'sitting at meat in the idol's temple'. His very shopping raised the problem of meat which had been sacrificed to idols. Here was the true source of the animus against the Christians. It lay in 'the' way in which the new religion struck at the roots of social intercourse, and menaced the time-honoured fabric of society. . . . The popular view that Christians were anti-social

¹ *De Spectaculis*, 8.

kill-joys with a more than Jewish hatred of the human race, if mistaken, is at least intelligible'.¹

It is only the occasional oddity among humans who enjoys provoking the hostility of the world at large, and who gains satisfaction in abstention from the common pleasures and activities of society. It is reasonable to suppose that Christian minds at Corinth shrank from unnecessary rigour in social intercourse, and from an unbecoming and ungracious withdrawal from the common life about them. The Jerusalem Council² had laid down rules in its letter to the Churches of Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia which were a 'burden hard to be borne' in the Greek city. The Corinthian Church, consulting Paul, had expressed a leaning towards greater liberty in the matter of 'things sacrificed to idols', and there is no doubt that freedom in this regard would have gone far to simplify the Christian's difficulties in the idol-ridden town. The social dinner abroad, the formal guild banquet, and the purchase of one's own household supplies, forthwith became possible. What was Paul, with the Jerusalem ruling in his mind, to say?

Chapters viii-x contain the answer. Paul stood for liberty, but he knew the practical difficulties of weak men and women newly rescued from the open vice of pagan society. He knew human nature, and was well aware that the temptations of good fellowship can be more damaging than the testings of persecution. He was conscious, too, of the watchful eye of the non-Christian world, which, then as now, was critically conscious of the standards to be expected from the professing Christian. His solution, therefore, was as

¹ Halliday, *The Pagan Background of Early Christianity*, p. 25.

² Acts xv.

follows. First came an admission that the question was decided in principle by the fundamental religious truth that God is one. The sacrifice to the idol was an invalid, indeed a meaningless, transaction, and the meat, in consequence, the subject of no pernicious change.¹ On the other hand, there were those who had not understood this fundamental truth. Conscience in such cases rebukes, and the violation of conscience is a sin. For the sake of these 'weaker brethren' the stronger Christians should restrict their liberty.² Paul sets forth his own example. He himself had curtailed his personal liberty for the good of others.³ Moreover, bodily appetite requires discipline.⁴ This leads to a solemn warning against the contamination of idolatry, and to the clear statement that the communion of the Lord's Table precludes participation in pagan religious banquets. A heathen sacrificial feast, in other words, is a recognition of idolatry and an apostasy from Christ. As for buying meat in the market, or when dining at an unbeliever's table, the Christian need not enquire whether the flesh offered him is sacrificial or not, but if the fact is pointedly brought to his notice a challenge emerges, and the Christian must stand firm.⁵ Above and over all stands the supreme and comprehensive rule of doing everything to God's glory.

Such was Paul's sane ruling. It is still valid. Year by year the problem shifts its ground of emphasis, but remains fundamentally similar in import and solution. 'He taught us,' wrote Hughes of Arnold, 'that in this wonderful world no one can tell which of his actions is

¹ 1 Cor. viii. 1 ff., x. 19, 26.

² 1 Cor. viii. 7-13, x. 23-30.

³ 1 Cor. ix. 1-22, x. 33-xi. 1.

⁴ 1 Cor. ix. 23 ff.

⁵ 1 Cor. x. 25-30.

indifferent and which is not. He taught us that by a thoughtless word or look we may lead astray a brother for whom Christ died.' Such is Paul's meaning. Of course 'all things are lawful', but over all such liberty stands the surpassing glory of Christ, and through it all, and round it all, runs the constraining power of Christian love. It would appear that, as the vision faded and love grew faint, Paul's doctrine, robbed of its essential element, was corrupted and abused. For this 'the greatest of the Greeks'¹ was not to blame.

IV. FOLLOWERS OF BALAAM

Twenty years or less after Paul wrote to Corinth on idol meat and pagan banqueting, the Epistle of Jude was written. Connected with this document is the Second Epistle of Peter. The question of relationship need not detain us. Nor indeed is the matter of date very important. The letter of Jude, closely followed by that of Peter, is certainly evidence for the emergence in the early Church of a dissident group whom the writers of the letters in question saw fit to attack with vigour, passion, and invective.

These people, 'self-willed rebels like Korah, rainless clouds, fruitless trees, noisy surf, wandering stars, a menace to the fellowship of the Lord's Table', had 'taken the road of Cain, and perpetrated the old error of Balaam'. What does all this battery of metaphor suggest? Profession without reality, preaching without profit, pride and self-assertion, at least. And something more. Cain was the symbol of carnality in worship. His graceful altar, flower-decked, was the emblem of

¹ T. R. Glover's phrase.

the easy path, of religion stripped of sternness and austerity. Balaam, in the imagery of the passage, stands for the breakdown of separation, the effacement of those differences which mark and set apart the people of God, and the mingling of sacred and profane.

The figure of Balaam enables us to pursue the investigation a little further. In the second and third chapters of the Book of Revelation are recorded letters written to seven churches in Asia Minor. The letters partake of the apocalyptic imagery of the whole book, but there is no doubt at all that they were genuine letters to seven congregations in the seven varied towns the writer names. Sir William Ramsay has shown how apt is the metaphor and imagery in each separate case, and how intimate the writer's knowledge must have been of the geography, the history, and the civic and spiritual condition of each community and each church. The letters are documents of Church history.

In the letter to Pergamum the followers of Balaam appear again. In the same epistle they are identified with the Nicolaitans. The following quite literal translation of the Greek text brings this out:

‘ But I have a few things against you because you have there those who hold the teaching of Balaam who made it his aim to teach Balak how to put a stumbling block in the way of the sons of Israel, to eat idol meats and to commit fornication. Thus even you have those who hold in the same fashion the teaching of the Nicolaitans.’¹

Words could hardly be more plain. The Nicolaitans of the letters to Ephesus and Pergamum are those

¹ Rev. ii. 14, 15.

‘followers of Balaam’ who earned the contempt of Jude. And significantly enough, in the same connection, the old sins and problems of Corinth, ‘fornication and idol meat’, reappear. It seems clear that the Nicolaitans were libertines who counselled less rigid practices, a less uncompromising stand, a wider measure of participation in the pagan life of the wide Greek and Roman world, a gentler religion, less austere, less unsociable. It is quite clear that those who claimed a spurious liberty in Corinth, and covered loose living with the name of Paul if not of Christ, still lived. Moreover, they had formed a party, vocal, arrogant, and dangerous. What did they teach? Obviously, that the banquets of the world of guilds and paganism were no stumbling block. Membership of one’s appropriate organization, together with the functions and formalities entailed, need not be forgone. No absence or abstention on occasions of pagan holiday or festival was necessary. Let the Christian play his social part, and, like Naaman on his master’s escort in the temple of Rimmon, let him think of Christ when the pagan smoke curls upward. Had not the Lord spoken to those scrupulous for taboo and prohibition in the matter of the man who gathered sticks on the Sabbath? ‘O man,’ the logion runs, ‘if thou knowest what thou doest, blessed art thou. If thou knowest not, thou art accursed and a transgressor of the law.’¹ And had not Paul said, ‘To the pure all things are pure’?² Thus, no doubt, their argument.

They taught, says John, ‘fornication’. Is this the old problem of Corinth, where there were those who saw no contradiction between the immoralities of pagan

¹ Lk. vi. 5 in *Codex Bezae*.

² Tit. i. 15.

living and the profession of Christianity? Was John using the term in the metaphorical sense, 'as a general description of pagan religions viewed under the aspect of unfaithfulness to the true God'?¹ Or had the word reference to loose views of mixed marriage deprecated in the Second Epistle to Corinth, and permitted by the easy-going sectaries under the writer's fire? The literal significance is probably the true one. In the letter from the Jerusalem Council² 'things sacrificed to idols' are mentioned in deliberate proximity to 'fornication'. It seems that Christian opinion had associated 'idol meat' with pagan entertainment, and the richness of such entertainment in temptation to immorality may be illustrated from more than one ancient context. The fragments of Menander's plays are one notable document.

To return, however, to the figure of Balaam. The significance of the name is this: 'The libertines have wandered from the straight path, followed the path of one with pretensions to philosophy and leadership, who was nevertheless effectively rebuked by an ass ("God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the wise"), so do not fear the air of wisdom, or their professions of enlightenment. Balaam, moreover, erred through covetousness.³ These seducers of weak Christians are unwilling to incur the loss which follows social ostracism and the unpopularity which is courted by the loyal and rigid Christian. Balaam strayed because he hankered for lucre and lost his fellowship with God. Abusing his influence and ability, he seduced Israel from the pure worship of Jehovah. And the weapon in

¹ *Expositor's Greek Testament* Vol. v, p. 357 (Moffatt).

² Acts xv. 20.

³ See 2 Peter, *passim*.

his hand was the temptation to loose morality through the Moabite women, whose presence and company broke down the standards of God's people. Even so, those who cover rank paganism with a cloak of fair philosophy teach that those who, like Israel, were newly "escaped the defilements of the world" can safely and innocently face the revelry of the guild feasts with the seductions of wine and "singing dancing slaves". There are those even who condone illicit visits to the priestesses of Artemis and Aphrodite.' '... Woe to them. . . . These are the sunken rocks in your love feasts . . . for whom the blackness of darkness is reserved.'

In the letter to Thyatira, under another figure of speech from the Old Testament, the Nicolaitans appear again. It is significant that Thyatira was a centre of trade and commerce. More trade guilds appear in the records of Thyatira than in those of any other Asian city. Inscriptions mention wool-workers, linen-workers, dyers, leather-workers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave-dealers, and bronzesmiths. The dyers have left one mark in the New Testament which suggests the geographical breadth of Thyatiran trade. They brewed a red dye, probably the modern Turkey red, from the madder root, which grows abundantly in the district. The ancient purple was a colour nearer scarlet than blue, and it was this dye, or garments of this dye, that a brilliant business-woman was selling 500 miles away in Philippi in 52 A.D. In that year Paul arrived and found 'a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple of the city of Thyatira'.

Whether Lydia still lived when John wrote to Thyatira is not known. It is odd that two women of

Thyatira should appear in the New Testament, one the gracious hostess of Paul of Tarsus, the other the target of another apostle's scorn. This is what his cryptic message says:

‘But I hold it against you that you suffer the woman Jezebel who calls herself a prophetess and seduces my servants to commit fornication and eat things sacrificed to idols. And I gave her time for repentance but she does not want to repent of her immorality. See I am placing her on a couch, and those who commit uncleanness with her in great tribulation. . . . And to you I say and the rest of those in Thyatira who hold not this teaching, and who have not known “the deep things” as they call them (but “the deep things” of Satan), I put upon you no other burden. . . .’¹

Jezebel, it will be remembered, was the seal of a trade alliance. No other close relations were possible with Phoenicia, and there is no doubt that Ahab's Israel derived immense wealth from business conducted with the busy heathen on the coast. The oil and wheat of Israel, says Ezekiel,² went down to Tyre. The wealth of the world flowed back. Ahab was rich. He built an ivory house in Samaria, the foundations and the broad steps of which can still be seen. But prosperity is not always good for a nation. With Tyrian goods came Tyrian gods. With Jezebel came Baal. It is possible, therefore, that the choice on Carmel involved more than theology. When the people chose Jehovah it is not impossible that they precipitated an economic depression. A break with Jezebel was a break with Tyre.

¹ Rev. ii. 20–22, 24.

² Ezk. xxvii. 17.

It must not be supposed that a writer who lived nineteen centuries nearer to the events than we do, and who was steeped in the Old Testament, did not know this story. The reference to Jezebel is too uncommonly apt. The woman in Thyatira, a clever woman with a gift of speech who professed to interpret God's will, offered, in the same way, prosperity at the price of compromise with heathendom. She was a Nicolaitan who believed in establishing a compromise with surrounding society. In Thyatira, in fact, it must have been commercial ruin not to do so. Anxious men must have cried aloud for some formula of conduct by which they could maintain both their livelihood, so dependent upon their membership of the guild, and their allegiance to Christ. Was the hard choice Christ or poverty? 'No,' said Jezebel. 'Keep your heart intact. Learn "the deep things" of religion, and you will see that even behind pagan worship lives an acknowledgment of the Most High God. Go to the sacrifice, but think there of Christ. Attend the feasts, but set an example of purity and moderation.' 'Look,' answers John, 'I set her on a dining couch, and her vile associates with her, and they shall have opportunity to enjoy—great tribulation, unless *they* repent, for she has shown that *she* cannot repent.'¹

Such is the indictment of Nicolaitanism. It suggests a deep-seated and serious disagreement within the Church itself, which 'affected and determined, more than any other, the relation of the new religion to the existing forms and character of Greco-Roman city society'.² The real issue was this—should the Church

¹ Ramsay's paraphrase.

² Ramsay, *The Seven Churches*, p. 350.

accept society or declare war against it? Should Christianity adapt itself to the existing forms of the world at large, or force the world to conform to its principles? It is easy at this distance in time to overlook the vast human problems involved. 'We are struck,' Ramsay continues, 'with admiration at the unerring insight with which the Apostles gauged every question that presented itself in the complicated life of that period, and the quick, sure decision with which they seized and insisted on the essential, and neglected the accidental and secondary aspects of the case.' In the sphere of private living 'the accidental and secondary aspects of the case' may have bulked large and painfully. For a Christian of the middle class, trained by a rather elaborate education to take a somewhat artificial view of life, and to reconcile its contradictions by subtle devices of philosophy, tenacious in a class-conscious society of caste and position, Nicolaitanism must have appeared a mental haven after storm.

Consider the simple question of loyalty. The Church was not disloyal. Did the mere formality of a pinch of incense on the Emperor's altar, by which loyalty was demonstrated, matter? Refusal to comply, in a matter so seemingly trivial, with the wishes of authority, was dubbed contumacious. The note of impatience may be caught in Pliny's letter, and there is no doubt that many Christians would see reason in the view. 'An excellent and convincing argument,' says Ramsay,¹ 'can readily be worked out; and then—the whole ritual of the State religion would have followed as a matter of course; Christ and Augustus would have

¹ *The Seven Churches*, pp. 300–2, 343–53.

been throned side by side as they were in the compromise attempted by the Emperor Alexander Severus more than a century later; and everything that was vital in Christianity would have been lost.' Our debt to the determined men and women who carried the faith through this time of subtle testing and danger is immense.

The matter of loyalty is but one illustration. In every sphere of living there were social problems to which Nicolaitanism provided a specious and attractive answer. The pagan system had its grip on all the communal activities of society. The only safe attitude was uncompromising hostility. And, once engaged, the Christian found his battle-front extending. The world, soon aware of his opposition, dubbed him 'a hater of men', 'a plague', 'an enemy of humankind'. Only the occasional masochist finds pleasure in unpopularity and persecution. Thousands of natural men and women, convinced of the truth of the gospel, must have sought earnestly and sometimes in anguish of mind for gentler methods, a less downright approach, an attitude towards society, Christian indeed, but more co-operative, less open to misrepresentation and those cruel misunderstandings from which the normal person shrinks. The attack in the Second Epistle of Peter, like that of John in the letter to Thyatira, seems to be directed against the extremists of the party, who sought a cloak and pretext for participation in the frank licentiousness of paganism. It is certain that there would also have been moderate adherents of the liberal sect who had no thought of dishonouring Christ, but who merely sought relief from a social strain and stress beyond their human strength.

Was John, then, too harsh? Sir William Ramsay answers the question well. 'The historian,' he writes, 'must regard the Nicolaitans with intense interest, and must deeply regret that we know so little about them, and that only from their enemies. And yet at the same time he must feel that nothing could have saved the infant Church from melting away into one of those vague and ineffective schools of philosophic ethics except the stern and strict rule laid down by St. John. An easy-going Christianity could never have survived; it could not have conquered and trained the world; only the most convinced, resolute, almost bigoted adherence to the most uncompromising interpretation of its own principles could have given the Christians the courage and self-reliance that were needed. For them to hesitate or to doubt was to be lost.'¹

The cost was heavy—in loss, in physical and mental suffering. In Nero's Rome, we saw unpopularity beget persecution. Ephesus revealed a reaction as savage. In Bithynia, State repression followed the hostile protest of resentful paganism. In the early records of the Church we have tried to trace the first attempts of Christians to live at peace with paganism; we have read the warnings of Paul, and seen how, in disregard of those warnings, a group emerged who abused the noble doctrine of liberty and mingled Christ determinedly with Belial. As the New Testament closes, the long years of State persecution are about to open. They, as Pliny shows, were to cleanse and purify the Church. But the Church could never have survived the impact of those years had there not been in her midst a body of men and women who literally 'counted all things but

¹ *loc. cit.*

loss for Christ '. We bow the head before those who bore all the human heart finds it most difficult to bear, to preserve the faith unsullied, unadulterated, undamaged, and intact.

In conclusion hear Professor Butterfield's significant words again: ' We are back for the first time in the earliest centuries of Christianity, and those centuries afford some relevant clues to the kind of attitude to adopt.'

